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Is Political Marketing Bad for Canadian Democracy? Susan Delcourt versus Brad Lavigne

Two books were recently published that outline the rise of modern political marketing in Canada but they come to very different conclusions about how beneficial it is to democracy.

Shopping for Votes by Susan Delcourt and *Building the Orange Wave* by Brad Lavigne describe how contemporary political parties in Canada use advertising to build up the image of their leader or attack their opponents, develop plans to 'spin' media coverage, shape their platforms through polling, and build sophisticated databases to enable them to 'microtarget' voters. Microtargeting is the process by which political parties narrow the number of voters that they contact and create appeals that focus on specific neighbourhoods or particular types of voters (an ethnic group, an occupational category, or people that do not always turnout to vote).

Delcourt spends most of her book describing the rise of political marketing in Canada from the 1960s until now. This historical outline foreshadows the last ten pages of the book that make a strong critique of modern political marketing in Canada. She claims that political marketing dumbs down politics and treats voters like consumers rather than citizens. As voters increasingly see politics as a series of 'consumer-seller' exchanges, there is a decline of civic duty. Consequently, cynicism rises and voter turnout falls as politics is reduced to attack ads, snappy slogans, and an unrelenting obsession with leaders' personalities. Moreover, she claims that the practice of Canadian politics has become about serving niche markets and giving targeted voters what they want as opposed to making tough, but unpopular, public policy decisions and brokering a broad national consensus and vision.

On the other hand, Lavigne sees political marketing simply as how the game is played. He illustrates a great respect for the political marketing prowess of the Harper Conservatives and takes several pot shots at what perceives to be the political marketing follies of the Liberals under Dion and Ignatieff. More importantly, Lavigne believes that he and other members of Layton's inner circle led the NDP to

embrace the modern political marketing techniques that transformed the NDP from a party with less than 10% of the national vote to a “viable alternative to form the country’s government” (page 2).

Overall, the two books provide fascinating perspectives about the relationship between modern political marketing and Canadian democracy. However, I believe that Delacourt’s critique of political marketing is largely unwarranted.

While political scientists have noted a decline in civic duty that is connected to lower voter turnout, there is no evidence that this decline in civic duty is caused by modern political marketing techniques. It is entirely possible that political marketing is not the culprit.

In fact, a crucial component of political marketing is identifying your party’s supporters and appealing to them with the types of policies and language that will get them out to vote on Election Day. Political marketing also aims to craft ‘market-tested’ appeals that will increase a political party’s number of volunteers, donor base, and e-mails lists used to communicate with party supporters. The thrust of political marketing is to encourage the participation in the electoral process of the greatest number of your supporters as possible. The brilliance of political marketing is that it uses modern technology like polling and databases to ensure the most effective use of a party’s resources in getting their supporters to the polls and motivating citizens to volunteer their time to the cause. Political parties no longer waste valuable time and resources bothering citizens who do not share their beliefs or communicating with their supporters in ways that do not excite them. In many ways, political marketing makes political parties more effective vehicles for increasing democratic engagement.

To the extent that political marketing can bring more people into the political process and knit them into a coalition for social change, it can push for a bold national vision of what Canada can become. Harper’s Conservatives have used political marketing to form a coalition of voters that is redefining Canadian political culture to focus more on individualism, small government, low taxes, and national symbols like the military. As Lavigne points out, under Jack Layton, the NDP used political marketing to build a counter-movement that would redefine Canadian politics around increasing equality, more generous social programs, and a collectivist view of society. Justin Trudeau’s team may be using political marketing right now to push Canada in a more centrist direction that falls somewhere between the vision of the NDP and the Conservatives.

Evidently, modern political marketing does have its unsavoury elements like overly aggressive attack ads or voter suppression through misleading robocalls. While there may be a need to improve the ethics and rules around political marketing in Canada, Lavigne is correct in mapping out how political marketing is the way that social change will be made in the future. Further, if we do it properly, political marketing could also help to revitalize Canadian democracy.

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